

Benjamin H. Latrobe to Thomas Jefferson, November 5, 1816, with Drawings, from Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital. Edited by Saul K. Padover.

Latrobe to Jefferson B. Henry Latrobe to Thomas Jefferson

Washington, November 5, 1816

Dear Sir: Your letter of the 27th of August received. I was confined to my bed by a bilious fever ...

You have done my capital much honor in making it the support of your dial. The columns and capitals as executed and standing in the north wing of the Capitol on the ground floor were not much injured by the British, so little indeed that I wish some part of the building to remain as they left it. I do not propose to repair them unless the president shall order it to be done.

By the suggestion of the Senate I devised a very material alteration of their accommodations especially a great enlargement of the Chamber itself.

The great staircase must give way to the improvements. You probably recollect that, as a curious and difficult combination of admirably executed stone work, it was one of the most remarkable parts of the Capitol, but it was much injured by the Lanthorn, which being of wood, fell burning through the dome, and resting on the stairs, burnt many of the principal stones.

The staircase has now another situation. It will be less curious but have I think some beauty. The area of the stairs will be occupied by a vestibule, in the center of which a

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circular colonade will support a dome for the purpose of admitting light. The columns of the rotunda,

16 in number, must be more slender than the Ionic order will admit, and ought not to be of the Corinthian because the chamber itself is of the Ionic order. I have therefore composed a capital of leaves and flowers of the tobacco plant which has an intermediate effect approaching the Corinthian order and retaining the simplicity of the Clepsydra or Temple of the Winds. Below is a very hasty, and imperfect sketch of the capital.

Iardella⁷⁰ a sculptor who has just arrived, has made an admirable model for execution in which he has well preserved the botanical character of the plant, although it has been necessary to enlarge the proportion of the flowers to the leaves, and to arrange them in clusters of three. When we have done with the model I will take the liberty of forwarding it to you. I have neglected so long to answer your very kind letter, that I must intreat you to attribute my silence to anything but a diminution of my respect and attachment. Believe me, that it never can cease.

⁷⁰ Francisco Iardella.

Yours very respectfully, B. Henry Latrobe.

[Charles E. Fairman, ART AND ARTISTS OF THE CAPITOL OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, 29.]